

Universalism: History, Theology, and Practice

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Starr King School for the Ministry, Winter 2011

Course Description:

Universalism was smaller than Unitarianism at the time of merger, and thus has often been overshadowed within the Unitarian-Universalist movement. Nonetheless, it is the older of the two traditions, was larger for much of its history, was more effective in reaching rural and lower class communities while also having a presence among the urban elite, and played a significant role in advancing religious freedom and women's rights in North America; it also contributed to the struggles against slavery, poverty, and other major problems as well. This course will help contemporary Unitarian-Universalists appreciate better the history of their Universalist ancestors and discern how Universalism lives on within the combined denomination. Topics of study will include early Christian universalism, universalist ideas among the Unitarians, the creation and history of the Universalist Church of America, legal and social persecution of Universalists, universalist themes within other major religions, Universalist engagement with the Social Gospel and modern science, and more. Our approach will focus on three key areas: history (the evolution of Universalism and the factors contributing to its change), theology (the beliefs and attitudes of Universalists as they seek for truth), and practice (the religious activities of Universalists as they live their liberal religion).

Learning Outcomes:

Students will learn about how universalism has manifested and changed in many different contexts, from the ancient world to the present day, within and outside of Christianity, with particular emphasis on the historical evolution of the Universalist Church of America over more than two centuries. They will come away with a greater understanding of Universalism's development, major figures, intra- and inter-denominational conflicts, impact on North American society, institutional structures, primary forms of praxis, and current role in various religions, especially Unitarian-Universalism. This will result in the ability to draw on the Universalist tradition for the benefit of themselves and their congregations, to more accurately represent the Universalist heritage within Unitarian-Universalism, and to engage in dialogue with modern-day universalists within and beyond the UU denomination.

Format and Approach:

This course is divided into 14 thematic units, roughly ordered by chronology. Students will read selections from and about Universalists (particular emphasis is placed on primary source selections), each of which will be prefaced by an introduction by the instructor. They will then post a reflection that considers study questions posed by the instructor and their own questions and observations. Commenting on other students' papers will help further class discussion, augmented by the instructor's additional comments and follow-up posts to student queries. The course will culminate in a final project: based on their experiences in this class, each student will draft a sermon that introduces Universalism to a UU congregation that is unfamiliar with this aspect of their denominational roots, or in

the case of non-UU seminarians, that introduces Universalism as a theological impulse or historical sect to a congregation of their denomination. Students for whom this assignment is not relevant (such as those not proceeding into the ministry) will have the option to produce an original research paper instead. Marking for the course is based on weekly participation and the final writing project, which is due May 20.

Texts:

There are three books that students are expected to acquire, either through purchase or library borrowing. These are:

Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith, ed. by Ernest Cassara. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997 (ISBN 9780933840218, \$20)

The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism, by Charles A. Howe. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993 (ISBN 9781558963085, \$16)

The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology, by Forrest Church. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009 (ISBN 9780807073230, \$24.95)

The reading load expected for this course is approximately 100 pages/week (sometimes less, sometimes more, though never an outrageous amount). These three books are in print and easy to acquire from the UUA bookstore. The other readings are shorter excerpts or out of print; to accommodate students, the instructor will post copies of the readings at the course site and/or point students to online versions. It should go without saying that students are expected to do all the reading, every week.

In addition to the syllabus assignments, many weeks will include a posted lecture by the instructor. Students should read this lecture prior to doing the syllabus readings. Many weeks will also include a study sheet with questions for reflection/discussion. This too should be looked at prior to the reading, as the lecture and study questions will help students get the most out of their reading.

Reading Schedule:

Week 1 (Jan 31-Feb 6): Biblical and Early Christian Universalism

-“Universalism in the History of Christianity,” by Morwenna Ludlow. In *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, ed. by Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Patridge. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004: 191-215.

-“Quotes Suggestive of Universalism in the Bible,” by Jeff Wilson.

-*Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought*, by Steven R. Harmon, Dallas: University Press of America, 2003: 19-39, 49-60, 68-70, 83-98, 108-110, 125-129.

Week 2 (Feb 7-13): Forerunners to Denominational Universalism

-“The Life and Trance of George de Benneville.” *Journal of the Universalist Historical Society*, vol. 2 (1960-61): 71-87.

-“The Puritan Roots of American Universalism,” by Kenneth R. Morris. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 44, no. 4 (1991): 457-487.

-“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” by Jonathan Edwards.

-*Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*: 77-93.

Week 3 (Feb 14-20): The founding of Universalism in North America

-*The Larger Hope, Volume 1: The First Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1770-1870*, by Russell E. Miller. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979: 3-49, 53-75.

-*Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*: 55-77 .

Week 4 (Feb 21-27): Maturation and Internal Controversy

-*The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*: 17-32.

-*Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*: 95-105.

-*Voice to Universalists*, by Hosea Ballou. Boston: J.M. Usher, 1849: 78-108.

-*Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*: 148-164.

- *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*: 33-46.

Week 5 (Feb 28-Mar 6): Universalism in Practice

-“Discussion at Honesdale, PA,” by Thomas Jefferson Sawyer. *Universalist Union*, vol. 7, no. 6 (Saturday, Dec. 25, 1841): 84-87.

-“Baptism on the Universalist Frontier,” by Lewis Perry. *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History*, vol. 29 (2003): 3-18.

-*The Plain Guide to Universalism: Designed to Lead Inquirers to the Belief of That Doctrine, and Believers to the Practice of It*, by Thomas Whittemore. Boston: Thomas Whittemore, 1842: 340-346.

- *A Book of Prayer for the Church and the Home; With Selections from the Psalms, and a Collection of Hymns*. Boston: N.E. Universalist Publishing House, 1866: 31-45, 79-80, 97-103, 137-171.

Week 6 (Mar 7-13): Universalist Women

- *Standing Before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women and Social Reform, 1776-1936*, ed. by Dorothy May Emerson. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2000: 19-22, 35-40, 69-73, 78-83, 149-158, 199-206, 233-241, 246-254, 320-324, 386-389, 413-466, 476-485.

Week 7 (Mar 14-20): Social Effects of Universalism

-“Benjamin Rush: Religion and Social Activism,” by Weldon S. Crowley. *Religion in Life*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Summer 1974): 227-237.

-“The Nonresistance Philosophy of Adin Ballou (1803-1890),” by Stephen A. White. *Brethren Life and Thought*, vol. 24 (Spring 1979): 103-112.

-*The Larger Hope, Volume 1*: 487-533, 574-630.

Week 8 (Mar 21-27): Spring Recess

-no assigned reading

Week 9 (Mar 28-Apr 3): Universalist Missions

-“A Southern Woman’s Place in the Pulpit: Althalia Johnson Irwin Hears the Call of Universalism,” by Martha Williamson Rimmer. *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History*, vol. 30 (2005): 71-97.

-*The Larger Hope, Volume 2: The Second Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1870-1970*. By Russell E. Miller. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Society, 1979: 341-399,412-446.

Week 10 (Apr 4-10): The Rise of Christian Humanism

-“Progressive Changes in Universalist Thought,” by Marion D. Shutter. *The Arena*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Sept 1895): 1-11 (unpaginated).

-*Which Way? A Study of Universalists and Universalism*, by Lewis B. Fisher. Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1921: 4, 9-22, 122-127.

-“The Social Implications of Universalism,” by Clarence R. Skinner. *Journal of the Universalist Historical Society*, vol. 5 (1964-65): 79-122.

-*The Tao of Universalism: The Thoughts, Teachings, and Writings of Dr. John Murray Atwood*. Edited by John Stewart MacPhee. New York: Vantage Press, 1989: 3-9, 31-41, 46-57, 89-92, 111-121, 151-155.

Week 11 (Apr 11-17): Expanding the Circle

-“New Wine and Old Bottles,” by Brainard Gibbons. *The Christian Leader*, vol. 131 (Nov 1949): 403-404.

-*Religion Can Make Sense*. By Clinton Lee Scott. Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1949: 1-32, 37-41, 47-51, 62-65, 70-74, 85-93, 118-122, 147-156.

-*A Religion for One World: Art and Symbols for a Universal Religion*, by Kenneth L. Patton. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964: 271-337.

Week 12 (Apr 18-24): Moving Toward Consolidation

-*The Larger Hope, Volume 1*: 794-812, 833-840.

-*Tao of Universalism*: 159-162.

-*The Larger Hope, Volume 2*: 533-552, 583-607, 648-665.

-*The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association*, by Warren R. Ross. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2001: 13-28.

Week 13 (Apr 25-May 1): Other Universalists

-“Universalism Among the Early Brethren,” by James Alexander. *Brethren Life and Thought*. Vol. 32 (Winter 1987): 25-31.

-“Universal Salvation in the Eschatology of Sergius Bulgakov,” by Paul Gavrilyuk. *Journal of Theological Studies*, new series 57, no. 1 (April 2005): 110-132.

-*In the Hands of a Happy God: The “No-Hellers” of Central Appalachia*, by Howard Dorgan. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997: 31-49, 73-99, 122-144.

Week 14 (May 2-8): Rise of Evangelical Universalism

-“The Gospel of Inclusion,” by Kimberly French. *UU World*, vol. 23, iss. 3 (Fall 2009): 26-32.

-*If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*, by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003: 1-47.

-*The Evangelical Universalist*, by Gregory MacDonald. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006: 1-8, 133-156.

-*Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You’ve Been Taught About God’s Wrath and Judgment*, by Sharon Baker. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010: xi-xvi, 111-124, 177-181.

Week 15 (May 9-15): Continuing Presence of Universalism Within UUism

- *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*: 127-138.

-“Answering the Religious Right with the Big Heart of Universalism,” by Scott W. Alexander. *Salted with Fire: Unitarian Universalist Strategies for Sharing Faith and Growing Congregations*. Edited by Scott W. Alexander. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994: 31-41.

-*The Cathedral of the World*: 109-184.

-“Dragged Kicking and Screaming Into Heaven,” by Mark D. Morrison-Reed (unpublished): 1-5 (unpaginated).